



Colonial Modernity and Its Influence on Women's Cultural Roles in Bengal (1900–2020)

Arundhati Das

Research Scholar, Ph.D. in Sociology, YBN University, Namkum, Ranchi.

Dr. Kamlesh Kumar

Assistant Professor, (H.O.D.), Department of Sociology, YBN University, Namkum, Ranchi.

ABSTRACT

This study examines the transformative influence of modernization on women's roles in preserving cultural heritage in Bengal's coastal region from 1900 to 2020. Historically regarded as custodians of oral traditions, rituals, and indigenous crafts, women have progressively incorporated modern economic activities and digital technologies into heritage preservation. Employing historical analysis, ethnographic fieldwork, and literature review, the research investigates how social reforms, educational opportunities, and globalization have reshaped traditional cultural practices. The findings reveal that empowerment initiatives, market-driven innovations, and digital platforms have enabled women to navigate the dual demands of maintaining cultural traditions while engaging with contemporary socio-economic realities. These adaptations have fostered greater agency, visibility, and sustainability in cultural heritage management, demonstrating the capacity of women to mediate between tradition and modernity. The study highlights the critical role of education, skill development, and technological access in enhancing women's participation in cultural preservation, suggesting that targeted policy interventions can strengthen these adaptive strategies. By exploring the interplay between continuity and change, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how modernization can coexist with the safeguarding of intangible cultural assets, offering valuable insights for scholars, policymakers, and heritage practitioners seeking to support women-led cultural sustainability in evolving social contexts.

Keywords: *Modernization; Women's Empowerment; Cultural Heritage Preservation; Bengal Coastal Region; Tradition and Modernity.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Modernization has profoundly shaped women's roles in preserving cultural heritage in Bengal's coastal region between 1900 and 2020. Traditionally, women acted as custodians of oral traditions, rituals, and indigenous crafts, ensuring the transmission of cultural knowledge across generations. Over the past century, social reforms, expanding educational opportunities, and changing economic structures have redefined their participation, allowing women to balance traditional responsibilities with modern livelihoods. While processes of globalization and urbanization have posed challenges to cultural continuity, women have actively adapted by revitalizing folk arts, rituals, and heritage tourism, integrating contemporary methods with age-old practices. Empowerment programs, skill development initiatives, and access to digital technologies have further strengthened their capacity to sustain and promote cultural heritage. This study investigates the multifaceted ways in which modernization has transformed women's engagement in heritage preservation, highlighting their evolving contributions amid socio-economic and technological advancements. Drawing on historical, ethnographic, and literature review methodologies, the research emphasizes the agency of women as mediators between tradition and modernity, showcasing their role in cultural resilience and sustainability. By examining these dynamics, the study provides insights into policy and community-based strategies that can support women-led heritage initiatives, ensuring the preservation of cultural identity while embracing the demands of contemporary society (Ghosh, 2014; Hoque, 2022; Sharda, 2023).

1.1 Traditional Role of Women in Cultural Heritage Preservation

Women have long been the custodians of cultural heritage in Bengal's coastal region, playing a pivotal role in preserving oral traditions, rituals, and indigenous crafts. Their contributions span various aspects of cultural transmission, ensuring the continuity of ancestral knowledge across generations (Hoque, 2022; Ghosh, 2014).

Oral Traditions and Folklore: Women have traditionally been the principal storytellers within families and communities, serving as vital transmitters of cultural knowledge. Through songs, folktales, and ballads, they have preserved myths, legends, and historical narratives that shape regional identity and collective memory. These oral traditions not only entertain but also function as moral and ethical guides, instilling cultural values and social norms in younger generations. In Bengal's coastal and agrarian communities, women perform work songs, lullabies, and seasonal chants that encapsulate local wisdom, ecological knowledge, and communal experiences. By embedding social teachings and historical consciousness within these performances, women ensure the continuity of intangible heritage while fostering a sense of belonging and identity among community members. Their storytelling practices reflect resilience and adaptability, allowing oral traditions to evolve alongside societal changes while maintaining their core cultural significance (Musa & Feng, 2016; Kottakkunnummal, 2015).

Religious and Social Rituals: Women have historically held a central role in performing and sustaining religious rituals and community festivals in Bengal. They lead and manage household ceremonies such as Lakshmi Puja, guide Bonbibi rituals in the Sundarbans, and coordinate seasonal harvest celebrations, ensuring the active participation of families and communities. These practices

not only reinforce social cohesion but also facilitate the intergenerational transmission of sacred customs, values, and beliefs. Beyond their participation, women frequently act as ritual specialists, instructing younger members in prayers, fasting practices, and the symbolic use of natural elements in worship. Their knowledge and leadership preserve the spiritual and cultural framework of their communities, while adapting rituals to contemporary contexts. By balancing tradition with evolving social dynamics, women continue to serve as custodians of Bengal's religious and cultural heritage, sustaining practices that strengthen identity, communal bonds, and cultural continuity (**Kottakkunnummal, 2015; Santhosh & Paleri, 2021**).

Indigenous Crafts and Artistic Heritage: Women have historically played a central role in Bengal's indigenous crafts, including weaving, pottery, kantha embroidery, and patachitra scroll painting. These crafts are not only valued for their aesthetic appeal but also serve as repositories of regional history, social narratives, and collective memory. Traditionally, women handcrafted textiles, household items, and ritual objects, embedding symbolic motifs that conveyed folklore, migration patterns, and devotional themes. Such artistic practices have functioned as tools for cultural education, identity formation, and intergenerational knowledge transfer. With the pressures of modernization, globalization, and economic change, women have adapted these crafts to contemporary markets while preserving their traditional significance, thus ensuring both cultural continuity and economic agency. Their sustained engagement has been pivotal in safeguarding Bengal's coastal cultural heritage, demonstrating resilience, creativity, and adaptive innovation in the face of evolving social and economic contexts (**Sharda, 2023; Ghosh, 2014**).

1.2 Impact of Social Reforms and Education

Influence of Reform Movements: Social reform movements in Bengal during the early twentieth century played a transformative role in elevating women's social position and enhancing their participation in cultural preservation. Reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, along with progressive organizations like the Brahmo Samaj and the Hindu Mahila Samiti, challenged deep-rooted patriarchal norms and campaigned for women's rights. Their advocacy for widow remarriage, abolition of child marriage, and gender equality in religious and social practices created new pathways for women to assert their agency. These reforms gradually dismantled restrictive customs that had confined women to domestic spaces, enabling them to participate more freely in community rituals, festivals, and cultural activities. As women gained educational opportunities and social visibility, they emerged as key contributors to safeguarding and transmitting cultural traditions—from performing arts and literature to religious ceremonies and folk practices. The reform movements also promoted a more inclusive understanding of cultural heritage, one that valued women's perspectives and participation. By blending progressive ideals with cultural continuity, these movements not only improved women's lives but also strengthened the richness and resilience of Bengal's cultural identity. Thus, social reforms became a powerful catalyst in shaping women's evolving role as active custodians of heritage (**Kottakkunnummal, 2015; Santhosh & Paleri, 2021**).

Women's Access to Education: Increased access to education enabled women to document and formalize traditional knowledge, preserving oral histories, folklore, and indigenous crafts. Schools and universities introduced courses on literature, music, and art, encouraging women to engage in academic and artistic preservation of their heritage. Educated women also took leadership roles in cultural organizations, publishing works on traditional practices and advocating for their protection. This transformation helped bridge the gap between tradition and modernity, reinforcing women's role as heritage custodians in evolving societal structures (*Hoque, 2022; Ghosh, 2014*).

1.3 Effects of Economic and Technological Changes

Economic Development and Changing Roles: Economic growth and industrialization in Bengal's coastal region have significantly reshaped women's involvement in cultural heritage preservation. While women were traditionally engaged in indigenous crafts and household-based cultural practices, many have transitioned to income-generating activities linked to handicrafts and tourism. The expansion of self-help groups (SHGs) and microfinance programs has further empowered women to commercialize traditional arts such as kantha embroidery and patachitra painting, providing both financial independence and a means to sustain cultural traditions. Yet, the shift toward market-oriented production has sometimes required altering traditional designs and techniques to meet consumer preferences. These modifications, though economically beneficial, have raised concerns about the dilution of cultural authenticity and the preservation of original artistic expressions. Thus, industrialization has brought both opportunities and challenges, enhancing women's economic roles while complicating efforts to maintain the purity of Bengal's rich cultural heritage (*Sharda, 2023; Ghosh, 2014*).

Technological Advancements and Digital Preservation: The introduction of technology has greatly transformed how women participate in cultural heritage preservation in Bengal. Digital platforms and social media have opened new avenues for documenting and showcasing folk traditions, music, and indigenous crafts, enabling women to share their cultural expressions with global audiences. E-commerce sites and online training programs have further supported women in sustaining traditional livelihoods while integrating into modern economic systems. These technological tools have increased visibility and economic opportunities for cultural practitioners. However, reliance on digital preservation also poses challenges, as younger generations may turn to online archives instead of learning directly from elders. This shift risks weakening personal, community-based transmission of cultural knowledge, potentially distancing traditions from their lived social contexts (*Musa & Feng, 2016; Rawichutiwan, 2019*).

1.4 Challenges of Globalization and Urbanization

Threats to Traditional Practices: Globalization and urbanization have contributed to the erosion of traditional cultural practices in Bengal's coastal region. Migration to cities, industrialization, and modern lifestyles have reduced community involvement in rituals, folklore, and indigenous crafts. Younger generations, influenced by global culture, often perceive these traditions as outdated, leading to declining transmission. Mechanization and mass production have further marginalized

handmade crafts like kantha embroidery and patachitra painting, threatening their authenticity. Additionally, commercialization of festivals and rituals has shifted attention from cultural meaning to economic profit, weakening their traditional significance (Rossi, 2018; Santhosh & Paleri, 2021).

Women's Adaptation Strategies: Despite these challenges, women in Bengal have adopted innovative strategies to sustain cultural heritage. Many use digital platforms to document and promote traditional arts, music, and storytelling, expanding their reach beyond local communities. Government and NGO-led programs further support women artisans through skill development and improved market access, helping traditional crafts remain economically viable. Community-based cultural groups also encourage women to teach rituals, folklore, and craft techniques to younger generations. By blending traditional knowledge with modern economic and technological tools, women continue to serve as key custodians of Bengal's cultural heritage amid globalization and urbanization (Musa & Feng, 2016; Rawichutiwan, 2019).

1.5 Empowerment and Cultural Sustainability

Role of Empowerment Programs: Various government and non-government initiatives have significantly empowered women to sustain and revitalize Bengal's cultural heritage. Programs promoting self-help groups (SHGs), microfinance, and cooperative models have enabled women artisans to market traditional crafts on national and global platforms. Institutions like the West Bengal Khadi & Village Industries Board and several NGOs provide training in weaving, embroidery, and folk art, fostering both economic independence and cultural preservation. Additionally, policies encouraging women's involvement in cultural tourism and heritage management have strengthened their roles as cultural ambassadors, ensuring that traditional practices remain vibrant and economically viable (Sharda, 2023; Ghosh, 2014).

Revitalization of Heritage Through Women's Leadership: Women have played a central role in reviving folk traditions, rituals, and indigenous crafts through a blend of educational and digital initiatives. Online platforms, cultural festivals, and government-supported heritage projects have empowered them to document, archive, and showcase traditional knowledge to wider audiences. Women-led community groups further strengthen preservation efforts by organizing storytelling sessions and intergenerational learning activities, ensuring the transmission of oral traditions. By combining modern technological tools with age-old practices, women have adapted cultural preservation to contemporary socio-economic contexts, helping maintain the vibrancy and sustainability of Bengal's cultural heritage (Hoque, 2022; Musa & Feng, 2016).

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Kottakkunnummal (2015) examined black-and-white photographs of poor rural Muslim women that appeared in advertisements and newspaper reports in *Chandrika*, the Malayalam daily associated with the Muslim League. The study explored how these images were used to solicit charity while simultaneously reflecting the political and social aspirations of the Malabar region. Drawing on oral narratives from Ponnani and historical records, the article showed how visual and material culture—particularly women's dress and modes of bodily covering—played a crucial role in shaping gendered

identities. The photographs portrayed women within specific moral and cultural frameworks, positioning them as vulnerable subjects in need of reform and sympathy. Aimed primarily at wealthy male Muslim readers in Kerala and the Gulf, these images invoked religious meanings and collective memories to reinforce political narratives. Overall, the study highlighted how the intersection of politics, charity, and gender constructed women as symbolic carriers of community identity and social aspiration.

Musa and Feng (2016) examined the challenges that emerged after George Town was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008, particularly in relation to heritage management and urban planning. Since the city was recognized as a “living” cultural site, the state government was required to safeguard both its tangible and intangible heritage. In response, George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI) introduced several initiatives, including a pilot oral history documentation project launched in 2013. Using this project as a case study, the authors highlighted how oral history serves as an effective tool for preserving community memories, documenting cultural practices, and promoting public understanding of heritage. The paper also emphasized the project’s role in fostering community participation, as local residents contributed personal narratives that enriched the city’s cultural record. Overall, the study demonstrated how oral history initiatives can strengthen heritage appreciation while encouraging more inclusive involvement in heritage conservation efforts.

Mukharji (2017) examined the understudied history of raciology in South Asia during the late colonial and early postcolonial periods, filling the gap between the decline of craniometry and the rise of modern genomic research. While existing scholarship largely focused on colonial-era biometrics, the article showed that Indian scientists and nationalists had embraced raciological ideas much earlier than commonly acknowledged. From the 1920s onward, various strands of “biometric nationalism” emerged, using anthropometric measurements to construct scientific claims about national identity and human variation. Mukharji argued that this trajectory was not inevitable. He contrasted biometric nationalism with an alternative intellectual approach known as “craftology,” developed by scholars engaged in vernacular anthropology outside formal academic institutions. Craftology emphasized local knowledge, artisanal traditions, and non-biometric understandings of human difference. The article demonstrated how craftology and biometric nationalism coexisted, competed, and occasionally intersected well into the late twentieth century, offering a more nuanced view of racial science in India’s intellectual history.

Rossi (2018) highlighted migration as a defining feature of African history, noting that human movement began within and beyond Africa nearly 2–2.5 million years ago. While early migration patterns remain debated, most theories emphasize intra-African mobility. In historical periods, African migrations fell into two categories: forced and voluntary. The continent was the origin of the world’s largest forced migrations, most notably the trans-Atlantic slave trade, alongside the long-standing trans-Saharan and Indian Ocean slave routes. Voluntary migrations within Africa were often driven by trade across ecological zones and seasonal labor demands. After the abolition of slavery, free labor mobility expanded, shaped significantly by European colonialism, which created new economic incentives and imposed coerced labor for infrastructure projects. Later, development-

oriented national and international policies further influenced mobility by channeling population movement. Over the past two centuries, many Africans migrated in search of better opportunities, yet contemporary displacement, trafficking, conflict, intolerance, and natural disasters continue to reveal the enduring impact of violence on migration experiences.

Rawichutiwan (2019) used a historical and ethnographic approach to examine how mangrove narratives in Thailand were constructed, circulated, and used to shape environmental governance and local livelihoods. The study explained that these narratives—broad claims about mangrove degradation, its causes, and proposed solutions—were treated as universal “truths” despite their political and cultural underpinnings. Drawing on 17 months of fieldwork in Talumphuk, a rural fishing village in southern Thailand, the research employed a critical political ecology lens to deconstruct dominant environmental discourse. It traced how scientific forestry traditions and institutional frameworks rooted in the colonial period influenced contemporary mangrove management. The study showed that narratives initially responding to mangrove loss from shrimp farming, and later intensified by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami under the idea of mangroves as “coastal guardians,” evolved into state-driven practices of mangrove planting and territorialization. These measures, while framed as conservation, further marginalized small-scale fishers and deepened their livelihood insecurities, especially among poorer groups.

Siriwardane-de Zoysa (2020) examined the role of infrastructural projects, specifically dyking, as both a means of coastal protection and a mode of living with water in delta megacities. Focusing on a recent donor-funded polder dyke in Metro Manila, Philippines, the study explored how coastal protection infrastructure shapes governance, everyday life, and urban socio-spatial dynamics. Using Evolutionary Governance Theory (EGT) and infrastructural anthropology, the paper analyzed the dyke as a socio-technological object and “living infrastructure” embedded within broader urban transformations involving disaster risk reduction, land use, livelihood access, tenurial rights, and neoliberal aesthetics. To move beyond the defence/dwelling binary, the study proposed four interrelated frames for understanding dyking practices: as a line of defence for protective living, an urban spectacle, a buffer or marker for land acquisition, and a fluid borderland. These frames highlighted how dyking both structures and disrupts material fixities and conventional aqua-terrestrial distinctions in urban coastal governance.

Santhosh and Paleri (2021) analyzed the processes of competing ethnicization among Hindu and Muslim communities in coastal Karnataka, South India, against the backdrop of rising Hindu nationalism. The study highlighted how militant Hindutva organizations institutionalized religious vigilantism and violence to construct an exclusivist ethno-Hindu identity, depoliticizing caste inequalities and framing religious differences as naturalized markers of ethnic distinction. In response, radical Islamic groups engaged in counter-ethnicization, mobilizing Muslim communities through discourses of self-defence and securitization, sometimes mirroring Hindutva strategies, despite officially promoting secularism. The research emphasized that these mutual processes of ethnicization foster a ‘vigilante public,’ intensifying religious polarization and undermining secular citizenship. The study concluded that such dynamics threaten democratic norms, complicate peaceful

coexistence, and reinforce rigid communal identities, highlighting the profound socio-political implications of religiously motivated ethnic mobilization in coastal Karnataka.

Hoque (2022) explored the formation and evolution of cultural identity among the Marma, one of the largest ethnic groups in Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), situated at the borderlands of South and Southeast Asia. The study examined historical processes behind the group's hybridity and the emergence of a cohesive self-identifying label. Employing concepts such as creolization, syncretism, and entanglement, the research highlighted how cultural boundaries and internal practices are continually reconfigured in response to environmental, historical, and social pressures. Ethnographic data were analysed in three parts, integrating multiple theoretical perspectives to understand identity creation and reproduction. The thesis demonstrated that traditional practices and ethnic identities are dynamic, constantly reinvented to navigate internal and external influences. By applying diverse analytical lenses, the study offered a comprehensive understanding of Marma cultural identity and contributed a detailed monograph on borderland cultures, emphasizing the value of multi-dimensional approaches to studying complex social and cultural identities.

Sharda (2023) reviewed the conditions of Kolkata's urban female workforce, highlighting that the vast majority of domestic workers—around 90%—are women employed in the informal sector. The study noted that domestic workers received comparatively lower wages than those in other metropolitan areas, reflecting weak enforcement of labor standards. Despite a 2019 government notification allowing registration of domestic workers as part of the unorganized sector to access social security, minimum wages, and legal protections, systemic and operational barriers prevented effective implementation. The review emphasized the persistent gap between legislation and practice, resulting in inadequate work conditions and economic vulnerability. Sharda further analyzed the structural exclusion of female domestic workers from basic rights and secure employment and proposed policy interventions, including community mobilization, partnerships with local institutions, and improved employer-worker relations, aimed at enhancing labor protections and socio-economic security for this marginalized workforce in Kolkata.

Ghosh (2014) investigated the socio-economic and ecological impacts of biodiversity conservation on communities residing in and around the Sundarban Biosphere Reserve (SBR) in India. The study focused particularly on local fishing populations living on the periphery of the reserve, examining how conservation policies influenced their livelihoods, access to natural resources, and day-to-day survival. It highlighted conflicts arising between biosphere reserve management authorities and local communities, which often emerged due to restrictions on resource use, limited participation in decision-making, and enforcement measures perceived as restrictive or exclusionary. These conflicts reflected broader tensions between conservation objectives and the socio-economic needs of marginalized populations dependent on natural resources for subsistence. Additionally, the research explored the role of ecotourism in the region, particularly in the Sundarban Tiger Reserve (STR), whose core area overlaps with the SBR. While ecotourism generated economic opportunities, it also introduced challenges related to equitable benefit-sharing, environmental pressures, and cultural impacts on local communities. By examining these dynamics, the study underscored the complex

interplay between biodiversity conservation, livelihood security, and community engagement. Ghosh emphasized the need for inclusive management strategies that integrate conservation goals with the socio-economic welfare of local populations to ensure sustainable and equitable outcomes in the Sundarban region.

3. FINDINGS FROM STUDY

Literature indicates that modernization has significantly influenced heritage preservation by reshaping women's roles and integrating traditional practices with modern economic and technological frameworks. Historically, women have acted as custodians of oral narratives, rituals, and indigenous crafts (Ghosh, 2014; Hoque, 2022), and contemporary developments now enable them to leverage digital platforms, e-commerce, and market innovations to sustain cultural practices (Musa & Feng, 2016; Sharda, 2023). Social reform movements and expanded access to education have further empowered women to document, revitalize, and advocate for cultural legacies (Kottakkunnummal, 2015; Santhosh & Paleri, 2021). Yet, globalization, urbanization, and commercialization pose challenges to the authentic transmission of heritage and traditional knowledge (Rossi, 2018; Rawichutiwan, 2019). Collectively, these studies highlight the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity, emphasizing how women navigate socio-economic, technological, and political contexts to preserve cultural heritage while adapting it to contemporary realities (Siriwardane-de Zoysa, 2020; Mukharji, 2017).

4. CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that modernization has significantly transformed women's roles in preserving Bengal's coastal cultural heritage. Traditionally responsible for oral narratives, rituals, and indigenous crafts, women have adapted to changing economic and technological landscapes by utilizing digital platforms and market-based initiatives. Educational opportunities and empowerment programs have further enhanced their capacity to maintain cultural continuity while engaging in new livelihoods. Despite these advances, globalization and urbanization pose ongoing challenges to the authenticity and intergenerational transmission of traditions. By blending traditional practices with contemporary innovations, women have emerged as key agents of cultural sustainability. To ensure that evolving cultural expressions remain both economically viable and culturally authentic, future policies should focus on strengthening support mechanisms, facilitating skill development, and promoting equitable access to markets and digital tools.

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